DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 320 689 PS 018 879

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TITLE Attitudinal and Behavioral Responses toward Parent Clientele of Parent and Nonparent Child Care Providers.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 11p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Caregivers; Comparative Analysis; *Day Care Centers; Early Childhood Education; *Expectation; Females; *Parents; Perception; Preschool Education; Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Behavior; *Teacher Characteristics

ABSTRACT

This study of child care providers examined the effect of parental status of providers on providers' expectations of parents and the effect of these expectations on behavior. A total of 85 child care providers from 11 child care centers completed a questionnaire that measured their attitudes about good parents, parents with children in their centers, most parents today, traditional sex roles, and how well parents know their children. Subjects were also asked to respond to a behavioral measure assessing willingness to comply with parents' wishes and truthfulness with parents. Findings showed that child care providers with children evaluated parents with children in their own centers and parents in general more positively than did child care providers without children. Child care providers with children indicated that they were more truthful with parents than were child care providers without children. It is concluded that future evaluations of parenting practices should take parental status of raters into account. (RH)

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Attitudinal and Behavioral Responses toward Parent Clientele of Parent and Nonparent Child Care Providers

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Abstract

One of the events which most significantly changes a person's life is the experience of becoming a parent. The purpose of this study was to examine whether or not the parental status of child care providers affects expectations of other parents and whether or not these expectations have an affect on behavior. Eighty-five child care providers from eleven child care centers completed a questionnaire which measured their attitudes about good parents, parents in their centers, most parents today, traditional sex-roles, and how well parents know their children. Subjects were also asked to respond to a behavioral measure assessing willingness to comply with parents' requests and wishes, and truthfulness to parent clientele. Child care providers with children evaluated parents in their own centers and parents in general more positively than child care providers without children. Child care providers with children indicated that they were more truthful to parents than child care providers without children. Further evaluations of parenting practices should take parental status of raters into account.

Introduction

A recent U.S. Bureau of Labor report indicates that mothers stay home to care for children while husbands work in only 6 % of American families. Today's parents are increasingly dependent on others to provide care for their children while they work. Ideally, for both parents and children, the relationship between the child care provider and the parent would be a supportive alliance, characterized by mutual respect and open communication.

To date, little research has been done on the relationship between child care providers and their parent clientele. In this study, the relationships among two salient caregiver characteristics, parental status and sex role beliefs, and attitudes and behavior toward parent clientle were investigated.

The experience of becoming a parent is associated with many changes for most individuals. Steffensmeier (1982) has divided the transition into three components: parental responsibilities and restrictions; gratification; and marital intimacy and stability. For women, becoming a parent is associated with more hours spent doing housework and less hours of housework done by the husband (Rexroat, 1987). Many new parents say that time is limited but say they are often bored (LaRossa, 1983). Contact with extended family increases when children are born. Contact with other parents also increases (Belsky & Rovine, 1984). Belsky and Rovine (1990), in studying one hundred twenty eight families, have demonstrated that becoming a parent is associated with many changes in the relationship between the new parents. Marital satisfaction changes and the change is often greater for wives since marital satisfaction is often higher before parenthood (Belsky, Lang, Rovine 1985). Wallace and Gotlib (1990) have identified factors which predicted the extent of the marital changes.

Having one's own children might be expected to alter one's expectations of youngsters in general and to modify a person's expectations of other parents. The purpose of this study was to see whether or not the parental status of child care providers affects their attitudes towards parents in general and their parent clientele and to see if these attitudes would affect behavior.

We were also interested in investigating whether traditional sex role attitudes among caregivers would affect their perceptions of their parent clientele and willingness to work openly and collaboratively with the parents at their centers.

Methods

Subjects

The subjects were eighty-four female child care providers (CCP) from eleven preschool and day care centers in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Of the twelve centers originally contacted, one center refused to participate after reviewing the questionnaire. Sixy-five percent of the

CCP had at least one child of their own. The average age of CCP with children was forty while the average age of CCP without children was twenty-two. Overall, 45% were younger than thirty years old. Seventy-six percent of subjects had worked less than five years at their present locations. Thirty-eight percent had not gone beyond a high school education, 57% had at least some undergraduate experience, and 5% had some graduate experience. Nine percent reported having a low income, 88% a medium income and 3% a high income.

Procedure

Directors of the centers were contacted by phone and asked for an interview. During the interview, the purpose of the study was explained and questionnaires were left with the director. The director distributed the questionnaires to the teachers, teachers' aids, and part-time workers. After completing it, the subject sealed the questionnaire in an envelope and returned it to the director. The sealed questionnaires were then picked up from the director.

Measure

The questionnaire contained six parts. The first three parts were an instrument developed by Kontos et al. (1983). Each part contains thirty items about parenting that subjects are to respond to on a seven-point scale with one being either poor parenting style or not typical and seven being good parenting style or very typical. The thirty items are of one of three types: positive behavior of parent, involvement of parent, or negative behavior of parent. Nine items assess positive parenting behavior (e.g., parent often asks teacher what child's day was like, child feels loved and important). Four items assess involvement parenting behavior (e.g., parent offers to help in the child care center, parent suggests ways teacher could change the program). Fifteen items assess negative parenting behavior (e.g., parent wants place to dump child, children are neglected). Part I asks subjects to rate the items according to their ideas of good parenting practices, Part II asks subjects to rate the items based how typical the behaviors are of the parents of the children in their centers, and Part III asks about how typical the items are of most American parents. The Spearman-Brown reliability coefficients were .85 for positive parenting behavior, .70 for involvement, and .87 for negative parenting behavior. The measure is internally consistent (the coefficient alpha was .92 for positive parenting behavior, .83 for involvement, and .93 for negative parenting behavior).

Scores on the positive items are combined, resulting in a positive parenting behaviors scale for each of the three parts. Scores are also combined for the involvement parenting behaviors scales and for the negative parenting behaviors scales. Summary scores are obtained for each of the three parts ("good parents", "center parents", and "most American parents") by adding the positive parenting

behaviors scale and the the involvment parenting behaviors scale and subtracting the negative parenting behaviors scale.

Part IV is a measure created by Brogan and Kutner (1974). The measure assesses attitudes towards traditional roles of women and contains thirty-six items which subjects are to rate from one (strongly disagree) to six (strongly agree). More than half of the items are worded so that strongly disagreeing ('1') indicates low adherence to traditional sex roles while strongly agreeing ('6') indicates high adherence to traditional sex roles. The direction of the remaining items is reversed in scoring. All scores are then added, resulting in a single score which indicates high traditional sex-typing for high scores and low traditional sex-typing for low scores.

Part V contains various questions about the relationship between the CCP subject and parent clientele. Subjects are asked to rate seven statements on a seven-point scale where '1' is strongly disagree and '7' is strongly agree. The statements deal with the subject's willingness to comply with parents wishes, their truthfulness to parents, their readiness to contact parents concerning the child's problems, their reluctance to go against parent's wishes, how strongly they feel that the parent knows the child better than they do, how strongly they feel that the parent knows the child's needs better than they do, and how strongly they believe that they themselves know what is best for the child.

Part VI asks the subject to give information about his or her age, educational background, experience with children, and socioeconomic status.

Results

CCP Group Comparisons

In order to assess the effect of parenting on CCP, t-tests were performed. There was a significant difference between the means on the negative parenting behaviors scale for centers' parents for CCP with children and CCP without children ($x=43.43$, $s.d.=14.09$ vs. $x=51.85$, $s.d.=13.58$; $t=2.59$, $df=78$, $p<.012$). CCP with children gave parents in their own centers higher ratings on the summary scale than CCP without children ($x=17.68$, $s.d.=22.14$ vs. $x=6.89$, $s.d.=19.25$; $t=2.25$, $df=78$, $p<.028$). There was a trend for CCP with children to rate themselves as higher on truthfulness with parents than CCP without children ($x=6.28$, $s.d.=1.11$ vs. $x=5.63$, $s.d.=1.57$; $t=1.93$, $df=78$, $p<.061$).

CCP with children tended to give higher summary ratings to most American parents than CCP without children ($x=9.80$, $s.d.=19.52$ vs. $x=-.31$, $s.d.=18.18$; $t=2.11$, $df=75$, $p<.039$). CCP with children tended to rated most American parents lower on the negative parenting behaviors scale than CCP without children ($x=51.67$, $s.d.=14.07$ vs. $x=58.58$, $s.d.=13.89$; $t=2.06$, $df=75$, $p<.045$).

The results of a t-test indicate that in this sample there was a significant difference between the ages of the CCP with children and the CCP without children ($x=40.08$,

s.d.=9.84 vs. x=22.00, s.d.=3.48; t=11.90, df=78, p<.0001).

Correlations

For all subjects, the two "parent knows best" items were positively correlated (parent knows the child's needs better, parent knows the child better; r=.78; p<.001). These two "parent knows best" items were both negatively correlated with the item assessing the CCP's belief that he or she knows what is best for the child (parent knows the child's needs better, r=-.66; p<.001; parent knows the child better, r=-.57; p<.001). The item assessing the CCP's belief that he or she knows what is best for the child ("I know best") was correlated with the summary evaluation of good parents (r=.35; p<.001). In evaluations of "good parents", the "I know best" item was inversely related to the negative parenting behaviors scale (r=-.36; p<.001). The negative parenting behaviors scale for good parents was correlated with the item assessing the CCP' belief that the parent knows the child's needs better (r=.29; p<.01). The "parent knows the child better" item was positively correlated with the summary scale of the CCP' own center (r=.36; p<.001) and ratings of the centers' parents on the positive parenting behaviors scale (r=.37; p<.001). The "parent knows the child better" item was inversely related to ratings of the center's parents on the negative parenting behaviors scale (r=-.31; p<.01).

Scores on involvement of the centers' parents were inversely related to willingness to comply (r=-.32; p<.01). Scores on involvement of most American parents was inversely related to willingness to comply (r=-.31; p<.01). The traditional sex-role scale was inversely related to willingness to comply (r=-.30; p<.01).

Discussion

CCP with children rated both the center's parents and parents in general more positively overall than CCP without children. CCP with children seem to view other parents' behavior toward their children more favorably than CCP without children. CCP with children rated both the center's parents and parents in general lower on the negative parenting behaviors scale than CCP without children. CCP with children believe that parents use negative parenting behaviors less than CCP without children. Perhaps CCP with children have a more accurate picture of other parents, and correctly characterize them as generally responding to their children in a positive fashion. Alternatively, CCP with children may evaluate other parents more leniently than those without children children, perhaps because those with children have more flexible expectations of parents. When CCP with children witness an incident of negative parenting behavior it is possible that they are more likely than CCP without children to dismiss the occurrence as an isolated, nonrepresentative event. In contrast, CCP without children may inadvertently tend to exaggerate negative behavior of parents. When CCP without children observe parents using negative parenting practices, they may assume that the parents engage in this behavior frequently because it so

starkly violates their rigid, idealized expectations of parents. However, any such measurable difference in expectations of "good parents" failed to materialize in this study; there was no significant difference between CCP with and without children on the summary ratings of good parents.

It is also possible that CCP without children report more negative parenting because they have no reason to deny it. CCP with children may deny negative behavior because it is behavior they themselves sometimes use with their own children, despite the fact that they find it generally unacceptable and anathema to their conceptualization of a "good parent".

CCP with children indicated that they were more truthful with parents than CCP without children. CCP with children may know they desire honesty from others that interact with their own children and may project that preference onto their parent clientele. They may more strongly believe that as CCP they need to forge an alliance with their parent clientele, and that honesty permits greater mutual problem solving and consistency for the child. Perhaps the experience of being a parent also changes expectations of children. CCP with children may be more accepting of children's misbehavior and will more readily discuss it with parents.

The finding of a significant age difference between CCP with and without children raises the possibility that age, and not the experience of becoming a parent, is what accounted for the observed group differences in the present study. Future studies might address this age confound by using covariate procedures to disentangle the effects of parent status and age.

When parent and nonparent CCP were pooled, several interesting findings emerged. The item assessing the CCP's belief that he or she knows what is best for the child ("I know best") was correlated with the summary evaluation and the positive parenting behaviors scale for good parents, and inversely related to the negative parenting behaviors scale of good parents. CCP that felt that they knew what was best for the child had higher expectations of good parents and were less accepting of negative parenting behavior. CCP who feel that they know what is best for the child may be confident people who are extremely dedicated and put much effort into doing what they think is best for the child. It is possible that these people feel that since they are doing so much for these children that are not their own, the parents of the children should also be highly committed to doing all that is possible for these children.

As expected, the two "parent knows best" items were correlated. CCP who felt that parents know their children better also felt that parents know their children's needs better. Unsurprisingly, these items were both negatively correlated with the "I know best" item. The "parent knows the child's needs better" item was correlated with the negative parenting behaviors scale for good parents. Apparently CCP who feel that the parents know the child's

needs better are somewhat more accepting of negative parenting behavior in general, since they endorsed more such behavior in their ratings of "good parents". They would seem to be affirming the parents' right to use even harsh disciplinary measures without reproach, on the grounds that the parents' superior knowledge of their child justifies such a "privilege".

The "parent knows the child better" item was positively correlated with the summary scale and the positive parenting behaviors scale for parents in the CCP's own center, and inversely related to the negative parenting behaviors scale for the CCP's own center. CCP who feel that parents know their children better feel that the parents in their own center use more positive parenting behaviors and less negative parenting behaviors. The CCP who feel that the parents know best trust their centers' parents' decisions and feel that their parent clientele are doing a fine job.

Scores on involvement of the centers' parents and of most American parents were inversely related to willingness to comply. CCP who see parents as highly involved may feel that parents are so involved that they actually ask for too much. CCP may not be willing to comply because they feel burdened by all the requests and percived demands of their parent clientele. This suggests that parents may need to be sensitive to this problem of excessive participation in the conduct of child care facility activities.

It was hypothesized that traditionally sex-typed people would be more critical of their parent clientele and especially working mothers. Such parents would be behaving contrary to traditional sex-role expectations. The findings from this study, however, failed to support this hypothesis. Contrary to expectations, more traditional CCP did not judge their nontraditional parent clientele more harshly than less traditional CCP. This would be desirable because it would mean that differences in sex-role conceptions between traditional CCP and working parents might not reduce the support provided by CCP to their parent clientele.

On the other hand, the instrument used in the present study may have been insensitive to the hypothesized tension between CCP and working parents. Part of the traditional sex-linked expectations of women is that they be "nice". Being critical of people, and especially of people for whom one works, is not "nice". It is possible that in order to see themselves as "nice", traditionally sex-typed CCP deny much of their negative feelings toward parents. At the very least, they may be reluctant to disclose such critical attitudes to others. This could account for the failure to find a relationship between traditional sex-role and ratings of parenting behaviors.

It is interesting to note that the traditional sex-role scale was inversely related to willingness to comply. It is possible that, although they deny negative attitudes towards parents, the feelings are indirectly expressed in their greater refusal to comply with parents' requests. Further investigation of this problem of greater noncompliance found

among CCP with more traditional sex-role expectations could be of value.

Furthermore, it is important to consider the possibility that many of these CCP may have been "nontraditional" working mothers themselves. The small sample size here precluded more refined analyses, but future studies should take into account the age of the children of the CCP, in order to separate those who might be classified as "employed mothers of young children" themselves.

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